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SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (ADDING TAGS)  
DEPT FOR EUR/ WE JAN LEVIN, AND EAP/BCLTV;  
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [VT](#) [VM](#) [KIRF](#)

SUBJECT: VIETNAM: JESUIT OFFICIAL SEES POSITIVE SIGNS FOR RELIGIOUS  
FREEDOM, RELUCTANCE TO LAUNCH DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

REF: VATICAN 00142

CLASSIFIED BY: D. Brent Hardt, Charge d'Affaires, EXEC, STATE.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) The Jesuit Curial Official responsible for Asia, Father Joseph Doan, told Emboffs recently that, despite Vietnam's recently floated desire to establish full diplomatic relations with the Holy See, he doubted the GOVN would do so until China first took that step. Despite this hurdle, Doan said religious orders enjoy greater leeway in training clergy in Vietnam than is the case for those studying to be diocesan priests. Still barred from engaging in secondary schooling -- their traditional educational focus -- Jesuits in Vietnam were working in other ways to "pass on the faith." For example, recent initiatives in healthcare undertaken by religious workers provided an opening for the Church to become more involved in the public sphere. Doan sees personal relationship building as the key to improving relations between the Catholic Church and the Vietnamese Government, a process he hopes will eventually lead to greater religious freedom. End Summary.

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Waiting for China  
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2. (C) Vietnamese Father Joseph Doan, the East Asian Regional Assistant at the Jesuit Curia in Rome, emphasized in a recent meeting with Poloffs that, while Vietnam seeks the international legitimacy that would come with the establishment of diplomatic relations with The Holy See, it would be hesitant to take that step before "big brother" China did so. On religious freedom, Doan maintained, Vietnam follows China's lead. As evidence, he pointed to the similarity in the new regulations on religious freedom promulgated in both countries: in both instances the regulations contain 48 articles and much the same substance. Despite similarities, Doan believes the Catholic Church in Vietnam is in a better position than in China Church due to the "frank dialogue" the Vietnamese bishops engage in with the GOVN government.

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An Easier Road for Religious Orders  
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3. (SBU) Discussing religious freedom for clergy in Vietnam, Doan emphasized that it was easier to become a religious priest in Vietnam (a member of a religious order) than a diocesan priest. While applicants to diocesan seminaries have long waits to receive government approval for their studies (in fact, a high percentage never receive such permission), Doan noted that would-be priests can begin studying right away at Jesuit novitiates. "We don't have to submit student lists to the government," Doan explained. In later stages of training, the Jesuits and other orders active in Vietnam such as the Dominicans, Franciscans and Redemptorists do have to submit student lists to authorities for approval, but apparently do so with less obstruction by the government. Doan claimed that the required final government approval of the ordination of all priests did not have a significant impact on religious orders.

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Elite Kindergartens  
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4. (C) Doan said that, due to the government's monopoly on secondary education, the Jesuits in Vietnam had only been permitted to open kindergartens. He mentioned a prestigious kindergarten in Phu Bai affiliated with the Jesuits and run by his cousin, a member of a female religious order. Doan jokes with her that she is the "most powerful woman in town" because many children of the city's elites attend the school. Barred from their traditional focus on secondary and higher education, Doan said the Jesuits "simply focus on passing on the faith as best we can."

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15. (C) One new focus of activity for Catholic religious workers has been in healthcare. Doan said that women religious are running many dispensaries across Vietnam and several palliative care programs for HIV/AIDS patients. He added that the government of Vietnam had requested 150 religious workers to assist with HIV/AIDS programs in the highlands, to join 30 who are already working there. According to Doan, the government of Vietnam is all too happy to allow religious workers to deal with patients it would prefer to avoid, such as lepers and those with HIV/AIDS. In addition to fulfilling the Church's goal of caring for those in need, Doan said such efforts provided an opening for the Church to become more involved generally in the public sphere -- an important step in gaining greater societal and governmental acceptance.

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Doan's "Mission Impossible"  
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16. (C) Doan spent nine years in Vietnamese jails and labor camps after having been arrested in 1981 as a Catholic priest. Still, he has been able to find a way to deal effectively with the Communist authorities. He insisted that it was possible to build trust with the authorities by establishing personal relationships and moving slowly and carefully. Illustrating this, Doan (protect) pointed out that as Jesuit Provincial in Vietnam he often had to approach government officials to secure permits for seminary students to study overseas. He recounted trying to get to know the responsible officials, little by little. At first they were obstructionist, but after they got to know him, they became helpful, eventually coaching him on how best to approach the application process to get the most advantageous permit for the student. When asked how he could work with the Vietnamese government after his painful experiences, Doan just shrugged and smiled. It is my "mission impossible," he said. "We hope that by building individual relationships between the Church and the government, we can establish greater trust." Doan remains hopeful that this trust will eventually lead to greater religious freedom in Vietnam.

HARDT

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